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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - June 9, 2006

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11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by
Embassy Minsk.

International Relations

12. Russian Ambassador Against Belarus' Retaliation for Travel Bans

On June 8, the Russian Ambassador to Belarus, Aleksandr Surikov, described as erroneous the Belarusian government's decision to ban European Union and US officials from entering the country in retaliation to a similar ban by Western countries. Surikov said that the EU's sanctions were a "big mistake" and that Russia has succeeded in reducing outside pressure on Belarus. He also claimed that Russia had persuaded Germany, France and Italy to have a milder attitude toward Belarus in comparison with new EU members. Earlier that day, a spokesman for the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, Andrei Popov, said that the Belarusian government had compiled a list of Western officials who would be banned from entering Belarus. Popov did not reveal specific names but said that the list included "the most odious political figures."

Post-Elections

13. Belarus' Election Commission Blasts ODIHR's Final Report

Central Election Commission (CEC) Secretary Nikolai Lozovik criticized the June 7 final report of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) on the March presidential election in Belarus as politically motivated and stated that the report cannot serve as grounds for not recognizing the election results. Moreover, Lozovik rebuked ODIHR for refusing to show the report to the CEC before publication and declared, "The ODIHR is a more closed institution than the CIA and the KGB combined." Lozovik also claimed that there were a number of "inaccuracies" in the ODIHR's preliminary conclusions and said that ODIHR should be accused of falsifying the observation results instead of accusing Belarusian election officials of fraud. The final report repeated ODIHR's earlier conclusion that the election failed to meet OSCE standards and issued more than 50 recommendations regarding Belarus' legal framework, voting regulations, registration of candidates and voters, campaign funding, media, complaints and appeals, vote counting and election observation.

14. Pro-Democracy Communist Leader Condemns Forcible Merger with
Pro-Lukashenko Party

On June 7, the pro-democratic Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC)

condemned what it called a government-inspired attempt to merge the BPC and the pro-government Communist Party of Belarus (CPB). BPC leader Sergei Kalyakin speculated that the Belarusian government persuaded several prominent BPC members to convene the reunification conference scheduled for July 15. CPB Central Committee Secretary Valery Drako stated that the party would provide assistance for organizing meetings and nominating delegates to the conference. Drako also said that the reunification initiative "comes from below" and that the parties' leaders would never agree to a merger. Drako explained, "common Communists did not like the policy of the BPC leaders, which had the sole purpose of fulfilling orders from the West and the United States and preventing the reelection of the incumbent president for a new term."

Civil Society

15. Belarusian Foreign Ministry Praises TIP Report

On June 8, Belarusian Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Popov described the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report of the U.S. Department of State as "balanced and constructive." Popov said that Belarus currently cooperates with other countries and international organizations and welcomed the United States to join its effort. Belarus is ranked "Tier 2," which means that it made significant efforts to comply with the country standards of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 but a lack of adequate funding for victim protection hampered the GOB's ability to deliver consistent assistance to victims and undertake new anti-trafficking responsibilities. According to the report, the government should provide additional training to officials to raise general awareness and improve victim identification throughout Belarus.

16. Prosecutor's Office Issued Second Warning to Pollster

On June 8, the director of Independent Institute of Social,

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Economic and Political Research Oleg Manaev has received a second official warning from the Belarusian Prosecutor's office ordering Manaev to desist from disseminating information about the results of March's presidential elections and from conducting social and political research. Deputy Prosecutor Mikalay Kupryjanau signed the warning that states that Manaev could face criminal charges under Article 369 of Belarus' criminal code. Professor Manaev maintained that the accusation is legally groundless. Manaev told Radio Svaboda that the official warning "is absurd, and it shows the state's control over the society in Belarus in a new light."

17. GOB Warns History Magazine against Violating Media Law

Belarus' Ministry of Information accused Valery Slivkin, the founder of the historical independent journal "Lidski Letapisets," and his editorial staff of failing to notify the Ministry promptly that the journal's circulation had changed. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), the editorial staff was accused of violating Belarusian media laws by indicating the wrong issue dates in recent Lidski Letapisets issues and failing to distribute free of charge the required number of copies of the publication. Founded in 1997, the magazine currently has a print run of 400 copies.

18. Lukashenko Criticizes Officials, Coaches for Olympic Performance

On June 6, President Lukashenko blamed coaches for Belarus' poor showing at the Olympics in Turin last February and reiterated the level of government support offered to sports in the country. He also warned that sports officials would "bear personal responsibility" for the performance of Belarusian athletes at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and the Vancouver Olympics in 2010. Lukashenko, who chairs Belarus' National Olympic Committee (NOC), directed Sports Minister Aleksandr Grigorov to resolve Belarus' shortage of well-trained coaches and called for reviewing athletes

and coaches who are entitled to monthly presidential allowances. Lukashenko told the NOC Executive Committee, "what is done for the development of sports in Belarus at present is not done in any other country... We should acknowledge that apart from the freestyle skiing team, other athletes did not achieve the results which they could achieve and which had been expected in Belarus." Freestyle skier Dmitry Dashchinsky, who came third in the men's aericals, won the country's only 2006 Olympic medal.

Economy

9. EU Textile, Clothing Companies Interested in Belarus

On June 8, the chairman of the Belarusian State Light Industry Concern (Bellegprom), Eduard Naryshkin, announced that textile and clothing companies from several countries of the European Union, including Romania and the Baltic states, are interested in relocating their manufacturing facilities to Belarus to avoid raising wages to the level required by the European Commission. Naryshkin predicted that in the near future China, India, Pakistan and Turkey would manufacture most large orders for clothing and textiles but that EU companies would place small, urgent orders in Belarus because of proximity and relatively low labor costs. Naryshkin said that Bellegprom plans to establish several centers for developing new textile and clothing models and technologies.

10. Lukashenko Limits Cost of Housing to USD 600 Per Square Meter

On June 8, Aleksandr Lukashenko ordered the newly appointed Construction Minister, Aleksandr Seleznev, to reduce next year's price of one square meter of housing to USD 600. Seleznev reported that the Presidium of the Council of Ministers has recently approved a set of measures that simplify the procedure of obtaining a land plot and reducing the wait for permission for a construction project by three to four times. Seleznev said that he expects the measures to reduce total construction costs by 10 percent and that data in design and estimate documents would be expressed in current prices, not 1991 prices as is the currently policy.

Quote of the Week

11. According to a Belarus zoo director, Zhanetta Kochenovskaya, a family of cynomolgus (long-tailed) monkeys has been helping Vitebsk visitors alleviate stress at a special "psychological relief room" at the zoo for several years by listening to their problems. Kochenovskaya observed:

"We've had troubled civil servants come to see their distant ancestors for psychological support and stress relief. And communicating with the monkeys helped them."

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